



I was a student in another world...

by [Heather Wells](#)

Our thanks to Heather Wells for sharing her experiences as a student at the Craft Institute of Kente Weaving in the Summer of 2000. All text and photographs are copyright Heather Wells. For permission to reproduce any part of this article please contact the author.

As a 21 year old third year textiles major at RISD I am very excited to learn more about the textiles world. Last year when Ellie "Aba" Schimelman came to RISD she spoke about the opportunity to weave traditional Kente cloth in an African village; I felt compelled to experience what was sure to be a life changing experience.

For the first two weeks, I traveled with a tour group of artists and other interesting people. We journeyed Accra and many of the outer villages, we were able to see artists in their communities, meet local people and experience Ghana in an integrated way. We were treated with warmth and sincere Ghanaian hospitality. We were invited into people's homes to eat with them and take libation -- a way of thanking your ancestors. The person who hosts the libation, pours the first sip of alcohol on the ground to give thanks and the cup is passed to all the people gathered around.

On one of our excursions I was able to meet a young boy of only nine years of age weaving Kente cloth. He wove at the pace and confidence of a master. While watching him, my excitement grew. Until this incident, I had only seen Kente cloth in books.



The people on the tour group left, and I was off to start weaving. For the following two weeks, I was lucky enough to be the first student in Bobbo's newly built Ewe Kente Weaving Institute. The school is built right next to his home. This made for a very interpersonal relationship with his family and friends. Bobbo is renowned in Ghana for being a master weaver. I felt honored to be invited into his village and share in his everyday activities.

[pagebreak]A former student of Bobbo's named Kwame was my teacher. He was a confident man, who never once gave a sign of frustration. During every step of my weaving, Kwame was right by my side, teaching, helping and giving me all the support and encouragement I needed.

Shortly after arriving at Bobbo's school, I began weaving on a strip of cloth that had already been prepared. This gave me the chance to practice speed and style and get comfortable with this new and unique weaving method. Kente weaving is a lot more physical than the American style I was used to. I sat on a bench only about a foot off the ground. My hands and feet had to learn to work in accordance with each other, my toes held a thick piece of yarn attached to the hollowed out top of a coconut. This mechanism acted as a lever, raising and lowering desired threads.

It was amazing to me that the loom I was weaving on was made out of wood and bamboo. It's a very primitive design, nothing flashy, but it worked with incredible efficiency. If any piece broke or wasn't working smoothly, Kwame would walk over to a palm tree, break off a branch, and fix the problem promptly.

After learning the loom setup and basic weaving techniques there was the task of designing my final Kente piece. Kwame and Bobbo took me to the weaving market where I could see all the components to weaving and choose which yarns I wanted to use. That same day I was lucky enough to see a woman plying two yarns together. She had the spools of yarn thrown over the branch of a palm tree about eleven feet in the air. She sat at the bottom of the tree and as the spools fell, she put a spin on them to combine and get the desired yarn effect. I also visited many of Bobbo's friends who were weavers, and I was able to watch them work. I was soon to find out that many people who I was surrounded by had grown up around weavers and had learned the trade. While I was still working on my practice strip some people would sit down and weave a bit, just for fun. They didn't consider themselves weavers, but it was in their blood.



[pagebreak]As my weaving continued Bobbo's friends and family would come visit and in a very amused way say to me "you're trying". I looked pretty bizarre, and needless to say I couldn't keep up with Bobbo's son Jim. Jim was a master weaver in his own right, weaving next to him I was in awe at the speed and creativity in which he worked.



For my final piece I was inspired by a goat Bobbo had bought, soon after I found out the goat wasn't for a pet. I decided to weave a goat village with blocks of brightly coloured boxes of short striping. The weaving was very slow but incredibly satisfying. Each block with a goat woven in took me about an hour to an hour and a half, and each of the striped boxes took maybe 45 minutes to an hour. There are no short cuts in weaving Kente cloth and with each box I finished, my respect for Kente weavers grew. I was very proud of myself.

Along with weaving Bobbo gave me a brief history of textiles and made sure I tasted the local flavor. I went with him and his wife Rose to the local markets where I could purchase gifts and see the richness of goods produced around me.

One morning Bobbo had a traditional drum and dance troupe come over. I was invited to do a war dance with the lead dancer, this was really exciting and a bit scary.

[pagebreak]Before I left I was lucky enough to go to a funeral. This celebration was unreal. At the funeral I and the other funeral goers dressed in our nicest fabrics and met up with friends. People from all over Ghana came together to celebrate a person's life, rather than mourning their death. We danced the day away.



I was very lucky to have learned this incredible style of weaving, passed down through the centuries. During my four weeks in Ghana I was taught a lot about the Ghanaian culture. Through weaving Kente cloth, where the process is very important I saw very clearly the devout structure expressed in the Ghanaian crafts.

So much of what I learned in Ghana will last with me for a long long time.

If you would like to ask me questions, or would like to hear some fun stories, please write me.

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